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SUBJECT: MALUKU: HIGH TURNOUT, ENTHUSIASM, ETHNICITY NOT RELIGION
MARK LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

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¶1. (SBU). Summary: The parliamentary elections in Maluku were peaceful and voter turnout was high. Despite the area's history of sectarian conflict, the outcome of this and recent local elections demonstrated that religion is no longer the primary factor in choosing political leadership. Voters tend to support candidates from the same tribe or village regardless of their religious background. Preliminary counts show that the President's Partai Demokrat has a strong lead over Golkar and PDIP, which dominated the 2004 elections. End Summary.

Decisions, decisions...

¶2. (SBU) We visited several polling stations in Ambon on election day. Polling stations were well-organized and election officials appeared prepared for their tasks. Approximately two-thirds of registered voters turned out, although many seemed confused by the numerous choices and complexity of the ballots. Witnesses from a number of political parties were actively observing the voting and ballot-counting processes. The security presence was adequate, and citizens in some polling stations lingered long after their ballots were cast, turning the democratic process into an entertaining community event. Most shops and public transport in Ambon did not operate during the election, freeing citizens to participate in the process throughout the day.

¶3. (SBU) Most voters said that their main reasons for voting were a desire for economic improvement, reduced unemployment and better educational opportunities for their children. Voters were eager to support any candidate who could realistically deliver on his/her commitment to improve the community, although the clear preference was for candidates with a common tribal or village connection.

Village/Ethnicity Most Important

¶4. (SBU) Although Ambon is about 60% Christian and 40% Muslim, voters did not consider religion a significant factor in this election. This is not surprising. Maluku's current governor is a Christian who won a healthy 62% of the vote, backed by nationalist party PDIP and Islamic-based parties PBB and PKB. In addition, Muslim voters helped elect the Maluku House Speaker and the Mayor of Ambon, both of whom are Christians. Two local Muslim intellectuals, Hasbollah (deputy rector of Ambon Islamic University), and Abidin (leader of the Maluku Interfaith Forum), told us that following the sectarian conflicts in Maluku, people no longer consider religion a major issue in selecting good

leaders. Rev. Johny Ruhulesin, head of Maluku Synod, was of the same opinion. He added that for Maluku voters, a local leader who shares a clan or village connection trumps one who merely shares the same religion. Islamic party PKS reportedly attempted to use Islam as a tool to mobilize voters, but did not gain much traction.

15. (SBU) According to Daniel Alexander Pattiwae of TV Ambon, the "quick count" showed President SBY's party Partai Demokrat well ahead of PDIP and Golkar. As votes were being counted in one polling station we observed, onlookers shouted their support every time they heard the name of Sonny Waplau, a local Chinese businessman from Partai Demokrat. Sonny Waplau and Alex Litaay -- former secretary general of PDIP -- were clearly the dominant vote-getters during the oral count. Some voters explained that they supported Waplau because he is a known business leader who could provide jobs. Waplau is not his actual family name, but rather the name of the village in Maluku where he lives, which he has adopted as his own.

MCCLELLAND